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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses one Chinese graduate student's experience with English writing. Through a literature review and personal interviews with other Chinese students, the paper explores the differences between Chinese and English writing. It summarizes the literature on differences between Chinese and English writing conventions in ideological and rhetorical phases, analyzing grammatical differences. Next, it discusses cultural differences, explaining that Chinese students are accustomed to using slogan-like wording and conforming with the political and academic mainstream rather than challenging authority. They are accustomed to casually using idioms, proverbs, or citings from famous people or writings rather than citing their sources. Chinese discourse development is indirect, while English discourse development is linear and direct. Chinese writing does not require a conclusion, because the conclusion is assumed from the many examples given. Writing in English requires an explicit conclusion, no matter how self-evident it is. Chinese students need to foster a new personal identity that is balanced with the old identity when writing in English. They must learn to analyze a problem from a personal point of view, use English rhetorical conventions, and use official citations. The paper examines some of the typical linguistic differences between Chinese and English which are prevalent in Chinese students' writing, analyzing the grammatical errors caused by these differences. The differences are in the areas of word inflections, modifiers, verbs, and commas. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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Chinese Interference in English Writing:

Cultural and Linguistic Differences

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Chinese Interference in English Writing:

Cultural and Linguistic Differences

Four years ago when I first came to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies, I was confident about my English writing proficiency. After all, I was an English major in China, and had taught English at one of the top universities in China. However, my first semester in the U.S. ended up in great anxiety, when one of my final papers was returned for revision. The comment from the professor was that my paper was a collection of data; it lacked analysis. I argued with her that my opinion and conclusion were self-evident in the data I chose to present. She said no matter how self-evident it was, I still need an explicit analysis and conclusion. I did as she instructed, very reluctantly, and managed to pass the course. This experience kept me thinking: Is this my unique encountering, or do other Chinese students have the same problems?

I talked with some Chinese students who are currently doing graduate studies in the U.S. They expressed similar confusions and frustrations as I did, which prompted me to resort to the literature on foreign/second language writing. Many researches find out that learners, consciously or unconsciously, transfer their native language knowledge to their second language learning process (Lado, 1957; Gass & Selinker, 1983; Odlin, 1989). Some of the transfers are positive. Other transfers, however, may be rather negative. The native language grammatical structures or cultural values are likely to interfere with students' performances in the second language. This is especially obvious for Chinese students. For one thing, Chinese and English linguistically belong to different language families; their grammar and writing systems are drastically different from each other. For another, the eastern and western cultures have a lot of discrepancies, or even

controversies. Adult learners whose native languages are deep-rooted may experience more interference from these distinctions and clashes.

ESL/EFL teachers who do not know of these distinctions may be perplexed by their Chinese students' writings and may not provide them with sufficient guidance. An American friend who taught some adult Chinese ESL students once said to me, "They all seemed to write in such a vague way. I'm curious why they did this." Therefore, I think it necessary to work out some guidelines for teachers. This paper aims at summarizing from the literature the differences between the Chinese and English writing conventions in ideological and rhetorical phases. Some obvious grammatical differences that I have noticed from my own teaching will also be analyzed. I hope that EFL/ESL teachers who teach Chinese students would be aware of these differences so as to make their writing instruction more targeted and effective.

Cultural Differences

This section deals with several typical differences between English and Chinese writing conventions. The italicized quotes are taken from my talks with some Chinese students currently studying in American universities.

"Aren't the authority's words strong enough to make the argument? Why does the teacher press for my opinion?"

The first difference between the two cultures lies in the presentation of ideas. Shen (1989) notices that ideologically, mainland China emphasizes "we" (the working class, the Party, the country), whereas western countries promote "I" (individuality).

Snively (1994) says Chinese students find it difficult to do critical writing because they are used to writing in conformity with the political and academic mainstreams. Students are not supposed to challenge teachers, authorities, and established knowledge etc. They tend to say "We all know" instead of "I believe." Matalene (1985), an American teacher who once taught English in China, cites an example from her students' writing on the topic of learning English. Almost all essays contained "to learn English as a tool, to adopt the advanced technology, to support the Four Modernizations, to make a contribution to the Motherland" (p. 794).

I find these expressions very familiar. From childhood, we were taught and encouraged to use this kind of patriotic wordings in our Chinese writing class. No wonder these students subconsciously copy them into their English essays. For younger generations growing up after the 1980s when China is opening more to the outside world, such slogans may gradually disappear. However, schooling still focuses on conveying established knowledge instead of cultivating individuality or critical thinking abilities, which revealed in writing is the absence of self-expression. The American educational philosophy, on the contrary, promotes individuality and values personal opinions in writing. Therefore, one of the first things a Chinese student has to learn in English writing is to expound on one's own thinking.

"All my knowledge is based on other people's findings. Isn't it stupid to spend time doing so detailed quotes?"

In addition to using slogan-like wording, Chinese writers are also accustomed to employing idioms, proverbs, or citing from famous people or writings, thinking that these

expressions would make their work more powerful. Such sentences as "As the old saying goes..." and "In conformity with the Party's basic principles..." are very popular in Chinese writing. A direct syndrome is citing without acknowledging, since these expressions or ideas are very well-known (or are supposed to be well-known). The tradition is so permeating that many Chinese students do not acknowledge their quotations seriously even in doing an academic piece. However, quoting without acknowledging can be accused of plagiarism in the western society. This difference could lead to misunderstanding or serious academic crisis to Chinese students.

"I made great efforts to write ten pages, but the teacher said she couldn't see my point."

Another difference has to do with the organization of exposition. Ostler (1987) has noticed that "various cultures organize the development of ideas differently when writing expository prose" (p. 169). Kaplan (1966) also remarks that failure to abide by the second-language discourse rules is the result of interference from the writer's first-language rhetorical organization. Chinese discourse development is rather indirect while English discourse is much more linear and direct. As Shen (1989) has concluded from her writing practice, logically, the Chinese tradition advocates reaching a topic gradually whereas the western tradition usually presents the argument directly with topic sentences. Matalene (1985) also notices that Chinese discourse depends on appeals to history, to tradition, and to authority, not logic. Her Chinese student remarked "It seems that we need a conclusion in English, but we often leave it to let people think when we write in Chinese" (p. 802). A Chinese student at Harvard said that "To state one's thesis in the beginning would make one look unskilled, unworthy of respect as an academic. It would

also seem *unaesthetic, childish* and *stupid*" (Snively, 1994, p. 40). Such indirectness in Chinese writing customs makes it difficult for Chinese students to organize discourse in English, for instance, giving topic sentences, making straight-forward introductions and explicit conclusions etc.

"When writing in Chinese, we first give examples, then the conclusion will naturally come out. You don't need to say it, and the reader can understand. But here, they require an explicit conclusion, no matter how self-evident it is."

The notion of reader-responsible vs. writer-responsible style in writing is brought up by Hinds (1986). He regards English as a writer-responsible language in which the writer is expected to make everything clear. However, in a reader-responsible language such as Japanese and Chinese, a high degree of shared knowledge is assumed and the reader is supposed to read between the lines. The reason why some Chinese students' writings sound so "vague" is that they are used to leaving room for the reader's rumination. They would skip details and examples, thinking that these are insignificant and inclined to underestimate the reader's knowledge. They would also skip explicit analysis on the data, assuming that everyone interprets the data in the same way and the conclusion is too apparent to state.

Classroom Implications

As Shen (1989) observes from her writing experiences in China and in the US, "the process of learning to write in English is in fact a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity" (p. 466). It is essential to first foster in Chinese students a new personal identity in writing in English. They should be encouraged to analyze a problem from a personal point of view, instead of simply copying from the authority. Next, they should be taught specifically the English rhetoric conventions -- linearity in discourse development, explicitness in analysis and conclusion, and the importance of citations -- as contrasted with their mother tongue conventions.

A teaching strategy suggested by Reid (1984) is that sample writings produced by native English speakers be analyzed to demonstrate the US ways of writing an essay. Another approach that I recommend is comparing and contrasting between a Chinese and an English essay (preferably about the same topic, e. g. the democratic movement in China) to display the different ways of establishing argument and developing discourse etc. If the teacher does not know Chinese, he can use the English translation of Chinese essays. A lot of such translated essay collections are available now.

Linguistic Differences

The negotiation of meaning is considered by many to be of primary importance in writing, and linguistic accuracy comes to be secondary (Barnett, 1989; Scott, 1996). However, Marton (1988) worries that too many grammatical errors may "stigmatize them [learners] socially in certain types of encounter with native speakers" (p. 53). I think that

language accuracy is also important, especially for people who write in English for academic or professional purposes, for instance, publishing English papers, doing graduate studies in the US, or drafting contracts for the company. In these cases, grammatical errors are likely to discredit the writer, cause misunderstandings, or even harm the relationships between partners. Therefore, accuracy needs to receive great attention when the writer is doing revision on his work.

This section intends to display some typical linguistic differences between Chinese and English, which I have found to be prevalent in my students' writings. I will analyze the grammar errors caused by these differences so that the teacher is aware of what to emphasize in guiding students' revision on surface structures. The example sentences are all taken from the writings of some Chinese college students.

Word Inflexion

Chinese does not have word inflexions to indicate tense, plural nouns, parts of speech, etc. as English. Many Chinese learners of English tend to forget to add -ed for past tense and -s for plural nouns or third person singular verbs. More importantly, they often ignore the change of word ending when the word function alters. For example:

- All these clear shows that Disney deliberately tried to avoid culture resistant from France.
- The Plan analyzed the whole industry and possible competitors before get into its own business.
- It is obviously that the management in EuroDisney is far away from its Tokyo descendant.

- A completely satisfaction and money back guarantee would be very essential for the business.
- Some describe in this part need more consistent.

These sentences are taken from a paper of a Chinese MBA student. He may not know that in English, adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs assume different functions and usually have different endings. This is an obvious interference from Chinese, in which words such as *describe, describes, described, describing, description, descriptive* do not differ in form.

Modifier

In Chinese, modifiers always precede the noun, whereas in English they can follow the noun, especially for attributive clauses. Therefore, Chinese students often have problems constructing an attributive clause. For example:

- Their owners may want to come to the store knows the pets better.
- These are all good strategies should be used.
- There are some people want to live in the countryside.
- The Plan provides lots of good statistic numbers which very helpful.
- My grandfather is the only person who influenced by his actions.

One salient error is the leaving out of the relative pronouns (that, which, who), because they do not exist in Chinese. For instance, the first sentence, if written in Chinese, would be like:

Their owners may want to come to knows the pets better the store.

The students may have learned that in English, the attributive clause should follow the noun it modifies. But out of habits, they forget the relative pronouns to link the noun and the clause.

Another obvious error is missing out an element in the attributive clause (the predicate or the object, as in the last two sentences respectively). This I think is due to students' unfamiliarity with the clause structure.

Verb

In English, there can only be one main verb in a sentence (the finite verb). The other verbs are either linked by some conjunctions, or are in non-finite forms such as infinitives, participles, gerunds, abstract nouns, attributive clauses etc. (Lu, 1985). For example:

- He came in *and* sat down.
- He stood there *waiting* for me.
- He came *to see* me.

But In Chinese, verbs can be listed one after another, for instance, "He came in sat down" or "He stood there wait for me." This habit is illustrated in many students' writing in English:

- Encourage a good combination of traditional Disney and European culture probably is the only way to go.
- This is the best point fits their needs.
- Keep the products fresh will require quick inventory turnover
- A message should be sent to the customer remind him how to use the product.

- Let off firecrackers is waste money.

It appears that the students do not have any idea of the relationships between the verbs. They may not be aware of the existence of nonfinite structures at all.

Comma

In English, complete sentences are either connected by conjunctions, or separated by periods or semicolons. In Chinese, however, commas can be used to combine two or more complete sentences without using conjunctions. This habit is brought by many Chinese students to their English compositions. Take the following three paragraphs as an example:

- The available bedroom is fully furnished, the large living-room is air-conditioned, the kitchen is equipped with whole set of cooking stuff plus microwave oven, the apartment is located between Harvard and MIT, parking is available in street.
- Some people regard it [setting off firecrackers] as a bad thing, more money was spend, the environment was polluted, noise was brought, bodies were hurt and so on.
- They hated Ali, they wanted to beat him even killed him, but always, landlords were foolish, their ideas never came true.

If these paragraphs are translated into Chinese, the commas would be perfectly OK. But they are not acceptable in English.

Classroom Implications

The above analysis illustrates that some grammatical errors in English writing are caused by the Chinese grammatical structures. I think it necessary to explicitly tell students the differences.

The writing class, of course, is not a grammar lesson. Correcting grammar errors should be placed at the revision stage. After revising the meaning of the text, the teacher could direct students' attention to the technical part of the text. A students' composition could be put up on the overhead projector, and the whole class will work together to improve its language. Through discussions or even debates, students should come to realize the causes of their grammatical difficulties and be aware of them in future writing. The teacher could also use the above examples to make the problem more conspicuous.

Conclusion

Lado points out that "The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them" (1957, p. 2). I hope this paper will help the teacher have more understanding of their Chinese students' English compositions, be sympathetic with some "idiosyncratic" expressions or ways of organization, and thus provide more targeted feedback on students' writings.

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